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A LITTLE BOOK of LOCAL VERSE



HOWARD
MUMFORD
JONES

A Little Book of Local Verse

BY

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

II

With an Introduction by

DAVID ORLAND COATE



La Crosse, Wisconsin
1915

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A Little Book of Local Verse

To My Mother

INTRODUCTION

WHY should anyone write or publish verse in these times of the moving picture, rag-time and the new dances, when any article to be sold must have *practical* writ large all over it? We are told that only the novelet, the short-story or the one-act play—provided it be a “problem play”—are read. Why in the Middle West should verse, local in interest and flavor, be written?

The answer is, for the reason that it is local. The author of “*A Little Book of Local Verse*” believes that too much poetry is so general as to have special interest for nobody. There are natural features, or traditions and practices so characteristic of every section, that once celebrated in song or limned on canvas, the people of that community must read—or see—and relish them. That is why Howard Jones has written of local things.

There is true poetry in the commonest sights and sounds, as Carlyle long ago pointed out. The only reason poetry is lacking to any place is that the seeing eye is lacking. To see and feel, and to report this knowledge faithfully and sincerely, remains still the highest work of poet and artist. Such work always gets a reading public. He is the true poet who opens the eyes of the less alert to the beauties around them. This is the true mission of art, be it that of the poet or that of the painter. As Browning wrote,

“For don't you mark? we're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see.”

Because the author of “*A Little Book of Local Verse*” is a poet, because he has seen and sung what no one can sing who has not felt the rhythmic sweep of the majestic Mississippi bluffs, who has not heard the message of the marsh lands, and loved the blue which nestles in the distant hills—for this reason he has given us this booklet of verse.

That he has thrilled to nature's varied symphony no one can doubt after reading "*June*" or "*When Shall We Together*" or "*Certain Reflections at Midway.*" Imagination of a high order is evidenced in such poems as "*At Eagle Bluff,*" "*A Red Leaf*" and "*Old Men.*" Felicity of phrasing makes "*Rain on the River*" a dainty piece of word-music. "*Railway Sketches*" are bits of vivid portrayal, and so are "*An Abandoned Cemetery*" and "*From Trempealeau,*" which show deep feeling and reflection upon the meanings of life.

Howard Jones is doing for La Crosse and its environment what Vachel Lindsay is doing for Springfield, what Arthur Upson and Richard Burton are doing for Minnesota, and what Madison Cawein did for Kentucky. That is why I am glad to write this introductory word. I am sure that we in this town shall make this booklet a success.

DAVID ORLAND COATE.

La Crosse, Wisconsin.

AN ABANDONED CEMETERY

THIS is their immortality—to lie
Among these fields of ripening corn and rye,
Here where the tangled shadows of old trees
Stain the rank grass, and nodding down the breeze,
Huge growths of fireweed swarm around the graves.

Below their little hill the slow creek laves
Its heap of pebbly gravel by the scar
Of raw, red clay above, and with a jar
Like bells of music breaking, in the turn
Shivers against the boulders.

Did they learn
The permanency of all impermanent things
Because the brook flows and the blackbird sings
And weeds grow tall—tansy and cockle-burr
And burdock—where the spire and altar were?
For look—that shameless woodbine climbs and sprawls
Along the broken stones that once were walls,
And sapling birches quiver in the shade
Where once the choir sang and the organ played.

Did they not care enough, those loving ones
Who came with passionate tears and orisons
And left them here with pageantry of grief?
Eternal sorrow, was it, then, so brief
That they forget? Or was it God forgot
Whom they adored in this forsaken spot,
Since of His temple there remain alone
This graveless space and crumbling piles of stone?

God whom they called Eternal—He is gone,
And grief has dried between the night and dawn,
That seemed eternal. Only transient grass,
The brooklet never still, brown birds that pass
Like winged moods across the blowing grain,
Shadows and clouds and sunlight—these remain

Where all things else, imagined without change
Of spirit or flesh have vanished.

Is it strange

These tombstones sag above the graves, or lie
Heavy with fruitless immortality?

Look here: "Belove . . wife . . Aet . . Rest with God,"

And here—"sister . . peace . . her soul . ." The sod

Is sunken where they rest, and in the noons

The crickets sing among the grass.

Our boons

Come strangely to us. . . It is better so,

Better to sleep as they do, and lie low

Beneath the ragged shadows and the rain.

Now they are spared the infinite slow pain

Of stirring life above them, the loud bell,

The quavering hymns, the words of heaven and hell;

Them shall no trampling feet disturb, nor cries

Of children playing make them lift their eyes,

Vexed that the living take so little care

To keep the fret of life away from there.

And most of all, the futile trick of flowers

Laid on their breasts to wither with the hours

And force the dead remember and awaken

From their slow sleep—this trouble, too, is taken.

Now beyond God or man, they only have

To keep the secure quiet of the grave,

Here where the rain falls and the tangled leaves

Of birch and elm trees shade them.

Past the sheaves

Beyond the road the distant reapers whir,

A grosbeak startles up, a grasshopper

Sings from a headstone—sounds that like the stream

Are drowsier than voices in a dream. . . .

Over them, wild flowers springing in the weeds

Where vernal winds have sown the random seeds,

Fireweed and golden-rod, and one slow star

Large in the vesper east, show where they are.

HE tramped with me the road that day,
I knew his heart was good ;
He did not gush about the sky,
Nor ponder on a butterfly—
He smoked his pipe a certain way,
I knew he understood.

A hill-side blue with spider-wort,
Wild mustard by the road,
A sudden flight of singing birds,
He looked—to my laconic words
Vouchsafed an answer more than curt,
And ever southward strode.

Beneath the old felt hat he wore,
His eyes were gray and keen ;
The sun and wind had stained his face,
He walked with tireless, easy grace—
An oriole !—But I forebore,
I knew those eyes had seen.

Across the marshland sweet with hay
The bluffs and meadows stood
Like pictures painted in the sky ;
He gabbled even less than I,
And smoked his pipe a certain way,
I knew his heart was good.

CERTAIN REFLECTIONS AT MIDWAY

AT Midway town, at Midway town
The dust-white road goes up and down,
And flashing past and to and fro
All summer long the autos go.

They seldom stop at Midway town,—
The place is small and dead and brown,
A store, a station and a hall,
A dozen houses—that is all.

'Tis true, the meadows are as fair
At Midway town as anywhere,
And overhead in August skies
The clouds careen like argosies.

The black-eyed Susans by the way
Curtsey and dance there every day,
And from the wheatfields joyously
I heard the blackbirds mock at me.

Surely at Midway one can feel
At night the cruising planet reel,
And see in heaven the milky wake
Of star-dust its propellers make.

And yet—and yet—at Midway town
The silver road goes up and down,
And flashing past and to and fro
All summer long the autos go.

RAILWAY SKETCHES

I—BUNK CARS

A ROW of broken box-cars by the track
Below the water-tower ; in the breeze
A torn, blue curtain flaps uneasily
In one rough window, and along their side
A line of garments flutters in the wind.
The blue smoke, rising, dances elfin-toed
Upon the rusted stove-pipe, and beyond
The great white sails of God go slowly by
Along the rustling hills. . . .

II—THE SECTION CREW

In the chill wet dawn of a morning in the fall
When a gray mist lies on the river,
And the dew-drenched lawn is shrouded in a pall
And the hooded hills seem to shiver,
I hear the squeak and rumble of a door,
And voices that swell and echo queerly,
The clatter and the creak of a car lifted o'er
The tracks and dropped again—nearly.

There's a crash of tools and the odor of a pipe
Astray on the cool, fresh morning ;
Silence—while the pools of the day grow ripe
For an overflow of rain ; then a warning
Called from the boss, and the tramp of awkward feet,
Stiff and chill from the station ;
A car rolls across the bridge with rhythmic beat,
And the hollow places boom reverberation.

III—THE DEPOT

It nestles underneath the dark green hills,
A doll-house painted red, and past it flies
The lean, swift limited whose whistle shrills
In one long sobbing shriek and slowly dies.

A straw-like arm above the chimney shifts,
Staccato clicking puncture the still air,
A thin bell jingles faintly, and in rifts
Of echoing rock two crows summon to prayer.

IV—AN EPISODE

Drunken, blear-eyed, shambling, sodden,
Clothed in rags and greasy-hatted
Comes a gray old man with dirty
Iron-gray hair into the depot.

At the door he stands a moment
Staring dazedly at the wood-stove ;
To the nearest bench he lurches
Where he sprawls in spineless comfort.

On the wall a flyspecked placard,
LOAFING NOT ALLOWED ; the agent
Leaves his key and swearing softly,
Kicks the fellow from the station.

WHEN shall we together
Tramp beneath the sky,
Thrusting through the weather
As swimmers strive together,
You and I?

How we ranged the valleys,
Panted up the road,
Sang in sudden sallies
Of mirth that woke the valleys
Where we strode !

Glad and free as birds are,
Laughter in your eyes,
Wild as poets' words are,
You were as the birds are,
Very wise.

Not for you the prison
Of the stupid town,
When the winds were risen,
You went forth from prison,
You went down,

Down along the river,
Dimpling in the rain
Where the poplars shiver
By the dancing river,
And again

Climbed the hills behind you
When the rains were done ;
Only God could find you
With the town behind you
In the sun !

Don't you hear them calling,
 Blackbirds in the grain,
Silver raindrops falling
Where the larks are calling
 You in vain ?

Comrade, when together
 Shall we tramp again
In the summer weather,
You and I together,
 Now as then ?

GRANDAD

A TITAN, in mute agony he stands,
Solemn and motionless and still; the winds
Toss his sparse hair upon their restless arms,
And he does not complain; the sun beats down
Upon his hoary head and deep-scarred brow
That saw the centuries march across the plain
With feet of haste and fire, and yet he keeps
Eternal silence; and the wild-footed rain
Tramples him, and the pitiless hail descends,
And fierce snows freeze him and the lightning digs
Their trenches in his antique limbs, and still
Rebuke nor plaint he utters, still he holds
An awful silence, as the Lord Christ stood
And spake no word to Pilate.

Does he dream
Gigantic visions of an elder world
Before the years were loosened, and the deep
Spawned forth its monsters in primeval slime,
While the great river rolled in majesty,
Brimming from bluff to bluff? Or does he hear
The thunder of the rushing buffalo
And the wild war-drum of the Indian
Booming across the plain or ever we,
Following the golden pathway of the sun,
Appeared to bruise his side?

Is this the stuff
To cut and carve for worthless paving stone?
Out of a hundred hills we could have spared,
Is this the bluff ye choose to tear away
And dump upon your streets? Shall his bones lie
Naked upon your roadways, and no man
Nor woman cry against it? Shame, O shame,
Thrice shame upon ye who have cut him down
And thrust his sides with spears! A poor old man,

Tottering and stumbling in his feeble age
Would have more reverence from ye than this hill,
Moulded with God's own finger-tips ! The voice
Of the great bluffs, his comrades, council-wise
Seated along the river, should have risen,
Spake, and rebuked ye ! What, is there no soul
In all your city that dare reverence
This sandstone Samson, bruised and stunned and still,
That talked of old with God ? How long, O Lord,
In the deep wisdom of Thy hidden ways,
The foolish ways of men, how long, how long ?

SUNDAY

YOUR Hell and Heaven, what are they?
I tramp the yellow road today,
And deep among the grass I see
The harebells' fairy blasphemy.

They blow on Sunday as they blow
On any day in all the row.
Your Hell and Heaven, what are they?
I tramp the yellow road today.

ANENT THE STREETCAR

STREETCARS? Yah!—Yellow box on wheels
That bumps and reels
From Farnam street to Main and back
On a (sporadic) double track,
Dusty or chilly—it depends,
On the time of *year*, and say,
They're always late—Lord! Anyway,
Don't talk streetcars here, my friends!

Perhaps

You ought to sit on peoples' laps,
Or kneel against the pane, your nose
The farthest angle from your toes.

Streetcars? Chariots that run
From Zanzibar to Babylon
Past New York and the sapphire bay
Whereby the sultan's daughters play;
Magic steeds of gold that fly
Where polar bears and lions lie
Hid in the wild
Somewhat too neatly for a child;
Enchanted yellow boats that swim
A hundred miles or maybe ten
The oceans dim,
Where funny little cities stand
Just on the edges of the land,
All ready to fall in, (They don't!)
And full of funny little men
Who look as if they'd bite—and won't;

And each man has a tiny shop
Beneath the tinkly trees,
All full of gingerbread and pop
And drums and elephants and carts
And dolls and candy hearts,
And O, such shiny, *shiny* seas !

Streetcars? Stop !
Your brains need dusting—try to sneeze !

THE MOVIES

THEY sit like shadows in the playhouse dim
Through half an hour's film of smiles and tears ;
They watch life like a shadow flow,
That cannot speak, but only walks and feels ;
One thing they do not know :
Within the darkened playhouse of the years,
Themselves like moving pictures come and go
Upon the film of Time in seven reels
For entertainment of the seraphim.

FROM TREMPÉALEAU

HERE where the Indian
Prayed to his Manitou,
Here where the Jossakeed
Made strong his medicine,
Stand with me. . . .

Below,
The slumbrous flow
Of waters laden down with sleep
Beneath their immortality. . .
The stream goes by
Indifferently
To seek the deep—
Men, cities, channels, hills, like April rains
Vanish—the stream remains.

These solid walls that seem so strong
Were not, and ere long
Will not be, and this citadel
Of rock, once rightly known,
More evanescent than a song,
More fluid than the brooks that swell,
More wraith-like than Time flown. . .

O God,
What hope, what hope?
Behold,
The little scope,
The life less durable than sod
The fingers that too soon grow cold!

. . . The stream remains,
Full-breasted and inscrutable,
Indifferent to mortal pains,
Uncognizant of man who strains
Conquered, and yet unconquerable,
And it is well.

He can not stop His ways remote
And bow
Because an ant is crushed beneath your feet ;
His ways are other ways than ours
Of ampler planets, stranger powers.
Trouble Him not now
With talk of pain
Endured, the stricken throat,
Lovers that part,
A heart
With unintended sorrow bittersweet.
Vex not the Infinite with prattle of the dust !
He must
Be busy elsewhere ; when we are slain,
He and the stream remain.

JUNE

BETWEEN the sun-down and the moon's slow rise
There came a spirit down the vesper skies
Full of glad sound and music, and with feet
Wild and sweet
Upon the hushed meadows, and her hair
Darker than midnight air.

She came with singing, and her voice was wild
With the joy-hearted laughter of a child,
Inmixed with tears and sudden prophecies
Of lovelier eyes
Than ever yet looked meekly on this earth
At love's eternal birth.

She sang, if singing be to give full throat
To all shy woodland things that have no note
Made vocal else—quaint whispers in the grass,
Moods that pass
Strangely across the leaves, and old, wise words
Gossiped among the birds.

Her eyes were deep and dear and very old,
Lucent with starlight and with liquid gold,
And yet a shadow brooding there to screen
Secrets unseen,
Fair promises of womanhood to come,
Now sweetly hid and dumb.

And she was clad in delicate shades of spring,
The tender inward of a rosebud's wing,
The timid baby green that early flushes
In emerald blushes
On swelling larch-leaves, and the faint-breathed pink
Anemones do drink.

Among the solemn-bearded, counsellor trees
I saw her dancing with a summer breeze,

Her slender, snowy feet like flashing stars
Across the bars
And jetty shadows of the vesper wood,
Willful and wild in mood.

And through the starlet silences her singing,
As though a thousand fairy bells were ringing
Like little liquid fountains, to my ear
Sweet and clear,
Melodiously sweet and clear, outrang
And I heard what she sang.

I heard, but can not tell you what she sang,
Save that the ancient meadows swiftly sprang
To melody behind her, and the tongue
Of each tree rung
In laughter, and each June-time flower that swells
Tinkled like elfin bells.

And as I sprang to catch her and discover
Whether, indeed, some wood god were her lover
Who thus made music for her on the lawn,
She was gone !
And I alone, and all the woods alone
Grew silent as a stone.

Perchance she fled away to the sunbeams,
Or in the secret sources of the streams
Hides, or in silver fountains of the air,
Or anywhere
(Who knows?) unsearchable beneath the moon,
This spirit that was June !

RAIN ON THE RIVER

RAIN on the river! And dance, dance, dance,
Bobbing and tripping
And sliding and slipping,
One little leg dipping
Into the stream where a drop of rain
With a circular strain
Melts on the river, the elf-men prance!

One elf to a drop,
One drop to an elf—
Will he never stop
To recover himself?

Nay!

Plop—plop—plop
In the early morn
The quick rain rattles and patters away!
Who could stop
With such an orchestra set to play
Music riddles
And fugues that chase
From top to bottom and back again
At a most impossible pace!
If you don't believe me, listen then—
To the hundred drums
As small as your thumbs
Hid just under the river's top,
Invisible fiddles,
A tiny horn,
And a great big bullfrog bass!

And look out there on the ballroom floor
Where every eddy has twenty score
Of fairy dancers
And goblin prancers!

Each little elf-man whirls like a top,
In a mad, mad dance they jostle and prance,
 And skip and flop
 And slip and drop
 And never stop
For rest or breath or a change at all
In this incredible carnival,
 This maddest,
 Gladdest
 Kind of a ball !—
Let them rest if they possibly can,
They've danced on the river since day began !

A RED LEAF

A LITTLE child is crying in the wind,
Yuhoo she sobs, and Yuhoo!

I have seen her many times :
On desolate moorlands and bleak, bare hilltops,
On the myriad, pouting lips of the river,
And in autumn trees,
A tiny, red-coated girl,
Dancing with rage and crying,
It is the little sister of the wind.

She has lost her doll and seeks everywhere,
Everywhere in the world,
Hunting for it,
And finds it not.

OLD MEN

THE stars are old, old men.
It is very cold in heaven,
And they blink and huddle closer to the fire,
Each at his separate hearthstone,
And mourn for the good old times
When peace and friendship
Were everywhere found on earth.

Their old limbs tremble,
And their ancient teeth
Chatter and shake in the cold.
They draw their ragged blankets over their heads,
And shout across the inter-stellar space
That it is very cold in heaven,
Very cold, indeed,
V - E - R - Y cold!

It is they who cause the winking of the stars.
The old men tremble so
By their firesides
That their bodies shake like the leaves of the
maple in autumn,
And the light shakes, too,
And they dance before it
To keep warm,
Or shiver, sitting down,
And moan for the good old times
That were never cold.

CLIMB up with me to Cliffwood and lie down
Full-length upon the sunsoaked turf, your eyes
Raised to the dazzling blue where August dies,
Your head upon your arm—so!—and the town
Behind you, while its troubled noises drown
In that clear gulf of air. The great clouds rise
In solemn silence up the summer skies,
And autumn somewhere waits in russet brown.

Now send your soul through yonder rift of blue
Among those drifting islands of the sky,
Where all is quietness. Let summer die!
What care we, who are borne on radiant wings
Down depthless fields of hollow air and through
The stainless splendor which the summer brings.

DEEP within a coulie
An apple-orchard glows
With startling gleams of yellow
And little spots of rose.

The heavy scent of summer
Upon the valley lies,
The smell of ripened wheat fields,
The warmth of stainless skies.

And buried in the clover
Beneath the apple-trees
A lass awaits her lover,
A robin waits a breeze.

The breeze will come by sunset,
She hopes the lover may.—
I know that apple-orchard,
He will not come today.

AT EAGLE BLUFF

FROM this bold rampart, by eternity
 Thrown up against the slow assaults of change,
The valley seems unending ; stately, slow
The labyrinthine river winds along
The horned bases of the solemn hills ;
Stretches of prairie lie beyond, with wheat
And hay and corn in patterns intricate
Of some enormous game, the tiny barns
And nestled houses for the counters to it.
A marsh lies next, a bed of black and green,
And far across, the blue Wisconsin hills
Rim up the valley's edge.

 The colors change,
Slow-shifting back and forth from dark to light
By acres and by miles. It is the clouds—
They float like pageants down the shimmering sky,
Huge galleons of white that sail and sail
An infinite ocean under cloudy capes
And walled and misty towns. . .

 Those are not clouds,
Those ponderous shapes of white! They are the gods,
Borne on their catafalques of stainless pride
To some gigantic grave—they are the gods,
The ancient gods, now mercifully dead.

They did not think to die as they desired,
Weary with all the bitterness of heaven
That could not help the waywardness of fools ;
Weary, beside, with bitterness of life,
Life everlasting, life insatiate,
Life like a slow fire unescapable,
Burdened with life as men with fear of death.

Was there no other end for them, with all
Their thunders and their priests and hecatombs,
Thus, thus to drift in death before the wind,

No other end, O unintelligible
And tongueless gulf of air, no other end?
Lo! The white-armed, the sea-born Aphrodite,
Lo! The curled brow and puzzled frown of Zeus,
Dead Pallas on her shield—O Wisdom, where,
Where is thy cunning now? And now Apollo
Dead on his bier, and yet the sun still shines.

And who are these on strange and carven barges,
Gigantic, dim, two-headed, some like dogs
And some like eagles—Thoth and Ophois
And Isis and Osiris—are they dead,
Despite the changeless pyramids, despite
Karnak and Elephantis and the sands
That blow round Memnon's statue?

Viking ships

Bear after them the raven-guarded Odin,
Thor with his hammer, Balder and the Norns,
Their pyres aflame behind them where the sun
Burns like a death-ship.

These are almond-eyed

And many-armed, or brown and hideous,
Wild deities that to our western ears
Are named uncouthly—they are dead, and India
Knows not nor cares, and Ganges through his leagues
Flows yet untroubled, and the Chinese bells
Ring, and the lotos blossoms in Japan.

And lastly comes a crucifix like snow,
And one upon it whiter than his bier. . .

The gods are dead. . . Only the wind drives on,
Drives them before it as a flock of sheep.
The gods are dead; where are the gods? O seek,
Seek in the upper chambers of the world
And find them with the never-dying wind.
It freshens now—the milk-white barges haste,
Pass and dissolve and fall in summer rain.

*You who have read this book,
If you sought for a "message" in it,
You were grandly left.*

*I may be a poet—my hair is short,
And I don't like afternoon tea—
But I'm not a glorified messenger boy
In the Celestial Telegraph Office,
And I won't run errands for the gods.*

*The only message I have
Is an old and trite one :
Fear God,
Love beautiful things,
And lastly, mind your own business.
These things comprise, as I take it,
The whole duty of man.*





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